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ABSTRACT

Many educational leaders are now realizing that the extension of the open space from the elementary level to that of the secondary has proceeded without sufficient understanding of the educational, sociological, and physiological changes that are required for the open space high school to function. Research findings are cited and a bibliography is included in the report. (Author/MLF)

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Planning: Its Avoidance Aided The Failure of Some Open Space High Schools

Ronald L. Williams

The least understood and least researched educational trauma in public school systems today is that of the open space high school. For many seasoned administrators, the advent of open space high schools within their districts has transcended the trauma stage into the realm of a nightmare, often culminating in a point of either the chief administrator resigning or being relieved of his position. Many educational leaders are now realizing that the extension of the open space from the elementary level to that of the secondary has proceeded without sufficient understanding of the educational, sociological and physiological changes that are required for the open space high school to function.

A decade ago in Texas the first open space schools began operating on the elementary level. The first major extension of this educational mode to the secondary level came in the fall of 1971, when a bloc of six open space high schools began operating. Two of the schools were in an inner-city situation with large minority populations. One was in a city in the western part of the state with less than 1% minority and three were on the suburban fringe of a major metropolis. Thus, these six schools covered the entire range of possible school situations.

This extension was made even though there had been no consensus among researchers as to the advantages or disadvantages of the open space elementary schools. Halliwell (1963) and Killough (1970) had

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published studies documenting advantages in the cognitive domain, while Koontz (1961), Warner (1970), Kennedy and Say (1971), Sackett (1971) and Townsend (1971) had published studies which either found no significant difference between open and traditional schools, or, they found adverse effects of the open space schools. Research which had become available after the opening of these schools has not tended to clarify the situation. Wren (1972) published a study showing advantages of the open space elementary school and Sanders and Wren (1975) published a summary of five years of research at the University of Houston which showed advantages. On the other hand, Read (1973) and Schnee and Park (1975) found no significant advantages for such schools.

Not finding consensus on the effects of the open space school upon the cognitive domain, researchers began probing the affective domain. Warner (1970) found no significant difference as did Read (1973). Sackett (1971), on the other hand, found that students in the open space school scored significantly lower on Coopersmith's Self-Esteem Inventory. It should be noted that Wilt (1971) and Martin and Pavan (1976) suggest that no single change in organization or architecture would make a great deal of difference. LaForge (1972) concluded his study by suggesting that the open space not be considered a variable in research.

What has happened to the open space high schools which opened in 1971 is much more clear than the research. Only one school has its original principal and only one district has the same superintendent. One school has been rebuilt with solid interior walls, three have semi-permanent interior walls which are not moved, while the remaining two have broken up the open space with panels or bookcases. The teaching

staff turnover has tended to be quite high. The largest school (with 1200 plus students) had only eleven teachers to stay with the district for four years.

The major factor in the lack of success in these schools has been the lack of planning prior to instituting the innovation. Faddism was one substitute for good planning. Five years ago, open space was still quite new and the superintendents in four of the five districts simply decided to graft open space secondary schools onto traditional elementary programs. The result was moderate to severe student problems with the articulation between elementary and secondary schools with quite different educational philosophies. One aspect of this has been the reduction of control over the students in the open space. Most administrators had projected that discipline and control would be facilitated by the open area, however, the teachers have found that they actually have less control (See Kaelin-1970; Williams-1975).

Faulty financial projections also helped to create problems in the open space high schools. Many administrators, as did the British before them, realized that open space schools are cheaper to build and will contain more students than will traditional schools. Thus, Kaelin (1970) found overcrowding in his study of elementary schools in Florida and Williams (1975) found consistent overcrowding in the open space high schools in Texas.

Further problems were created in the lack of planning for special inservice programs for the teachers of the new type schools. The staffs of the traditional schools were largely moved into the new buildings. With inservice programs so lowly rated that one district spent only

.020% of the cost of the building for inservice ($500), the staffs were not prepared to change their modes of instruction, only the location.

The fallacy of not preparing the teachers for the new environment had been pointed out for almost a generation. Beginning in 1953, Havighurst pointed out that "...in the final analysis, (the difference in a school) rests upon the individual teacher..." Many writers, Nyquist (1971), Resnick (1971), Calabro (1970), Fromm (1965), Heyman (1972), Rothwell (1973) and Barth (1974), had pointed out that the ancestor of the open space movement, the "Progressives" of the 1920's and '30's, had failed because they had made no changes in their methods.

A final evidence of a lack of planning lies in the failure of the creators of these new schools to come to grips with the philosophy undergirding open space schools. They never developed a definitive philosophy concerning what they were attempting, nor did they seem to recognize that there was a vast difference in the philosophies of the two types of educational modes. Several writers, such as Brunetti (1969) and Hull (1971) had pointed up significant differences, but they were ignored or discounted, as would be Kramer (1972) and Dillon and Franks (1974).

A decade ago, seemingly with little planning, some schools officials proclaimed to their publics that they had found the "school of the future"--the open space high school. They promised that the students would improve their knowledge in architectural gems, which had received the approval of educators, architects, sociologists and psychologists. As the years passed, many of the parents became dis-

enchanted with the schools due to social and economic problems and a multiplicity of articles which recorded the steadily dropping standardized test scores. The result has been that the populace has been turning against open space schools and their administrators. There is hope though for administrators who have little time to plan for the future of education. They can accept the new fad in education which has received a great deal of approval from various authorities. The new fad has a slogan which will satisfy many, it is "Back to Basics in the traditional school."

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